

Weber's Key to the 'Iron Cage'

Written and Copyrighted © 2009 by Walter A. Jensen
Doctoral Candidate - Department of Sociology - Western Michigan University
<http://www.walterjensen.net>

What is this 'iron cage,' as Max Weber (1864-1920) first described it in 1904-5, *and* can we free ourselves from it? Can modern human beings use the philosophies born out of our present economic system (i.e. capitalism) to free ourselves from the *remnants* of the social character of the 'Protestant Ethic' and the 'Spirit of Capitalism'? Can Weber's 'key,' ascetic rationalism, unlock the iron cage? This paper will attempt to address these questions by summarizing Weber's descriptions of the social character of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Once these two social character types have been addressed, I will attempt to articulate Weber's ascetic rationalism and see if it has the potential to unlock the cage. In order to begin, the reader must understand what is meant by the phrase 'social character.' Let us turn our attention to Erich Fromm (1900-1980).

In order to understand the focus of this paper, the reader needs to comprehend the "psychological motivations," or, in the words of Fromm, the social character of faith based communities (Weber 2002, 55 & Fromm 1994, 275-296). In the appendix of Fromm's 1941 *Escape from Freedom*, he describes that

The social character comprises only a selection of traits, *the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group* (1994, 276).

In other words, social character is not interested in "the peculiarities by which these persons differ from each other, but in that part of their character structure that is common to most members of the group" (Fromm 1994, 275). It appears that Fromm agreed with Weber to the extent that "ideas can become powerful forces, but only to the extent to which they are answers to specific human needs prominent in a given social character" (Fromm 1994, 279). In Weber's analysis, as we will soon see, the center of the social character of Lutherans, Calvinists, Pietists, Methodists, and Anabaptists (rebaptize) was a rationality that attempted to completely eliminate one type of theodicy (Weber 2002, 63). In short, *to alleviate salvation anxiety*.

Before we begin, a few remarks concerning the form of this paper. For convenience and efficiency, the ideologies known as Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism will be shortened as PE and SoC, respectfully. In addition, I have enumerated the factors that define PE for reading convenience, something that Weber didn't do.

Weber was an economist who wanted to understand the relationship between religion and the work ethic. According to Kalberg, Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was Weber's attempt

...to demonstrate that one important source of the modern work ethic and orientation to material success, which he calls the "spirit of capitalism," is located outside the realm of "this-worldly" utilitarian concerns and business astuteness (Weber 2002, xi).

To put it another way, Weber wished to ascertain

... to what extent, religious influences *co*-participated in the qualitative formation and quantitative expansion of the spirit [of Capitalism] across the globe. We wish further to assess which practical aspects of the culture upon which [modern] capitalism rests can be traced back to these religious influences (Weber 2002, 49, first bracket added for clarification, second bracket added by Kalberg).

The modern work ethic that Weber is describing was the one that first appeared shortly after the Reformation and continued to the beginning of the 19th century. In short, Weber argues that the religious ideology of the 'Protestant Ethic,' as he coined the term, set the stage for the SoC. For Weber, several religious factors from five Protestant theologies, Lutheranism, Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism, and the Anabaptist movements, make up this PE (Weber 2002, 53). In other words, according to Weber, as people acted socially among the different Protestant faiths, these theologies, as understood by the laity, combined to create the PE.

The first three factors of the PE come from the theology of Martin Luther (1483-1546). The first two factors are Luther's world renowned dogmas: *sola fide* - 'faith alone' and *sola scriptura* - 'scriptures alone.' A dogma, be it religious or secular, as it was taught to me in WMU's Comparative Religion department, is an assertion or set of assertions made with the highest level of certainty. Luther's dogmas, like all other dogmas, instill a particular orientation of action to 'this-worldly' reality *and* that the quintessential elements in achieving salvation in the 'next-world' is declaring one's faith in the 'Risen Lord' and that the scriptures (and not the Pope) are the sole authority in the lives of the faithful. The third factor is Luther's assertion that

the fulfillment of one's duties in 'this-worldly' reality constitutes the *only* way to please God, i.e. the creation of vocational calling – "one's task is given by God" (Weber 2002, 39-40). These three theological arguments were born out of Luther's concern and fear for his own salvation. According to Weaver,

Anxious about his own salvation, Luther thought that monastic life was the best way to overcome the doubts about his relationship with God ... Luther came to see that one is saved by faith alone (1991, 94).

In other words, Luther wanted to know, *with certainty*, whether he got into heaven *before he lived his life*. These three factors, created by Luther, are counter to Catholic doctrine, which teaches that salvation is achieved by faith *and* 'good works' (Mt 5:16, Mt 7:18-20, Mt 16:27, & Mt 25:34-36; James 2:14-18 & 2:20-24; 1 Cor 3:8 & 1 Cor 15:58; Keating 2000, 48-53). To put it another way, Catholics rejected Luther's theology that the fulfillment of one's duty *in* one's vocational calling *is* the highest expression of moral activity that one could carry out. By adopting Luther's theological argument, Lutherans avoided the salvation anxiety of the Catholics (e.g. not knowing if one gets into heaven until 'Judgment Day') *and* placed far less importance in 'good works,' Church authority, *and*, at the same time, allowed more time for other activities that did not involve 'salvation.' In short, a move away from the social character established by the Catholic Church where one must have faith *and* engage in 'good works,' in all social realms.

The next two factors come from the theology of John Calvin (1509-1564). In Calvin's theology, he keeps Luther's *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* but adds to the mix the doctrine of predestination, the fourth factor of the PE. Weber refers to Calvin's doctrine of predestination as "Calvinism's most characteristic dogma" (Weber 2002, 55). Weber's selective quotes from Westminster Confession of 1647 to paint a vivid picture of predestination:

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation ... By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and other foreordained to everlasting death (Weber 2002, 56).

Summarizing Calvin's argument,

God elected those to be saved and predestined those to be damned, and then God saw to it that those on the road to damnation were sinners and those on the road to salvation were saints. God's people—the elect—have been put on earth to work out the divine plan; election, therefore, is a calling and the Christian life a serious vocation (Weaver 1991, 98).

From this argument, Calvin concludes that 1) everyone is born a sinner; 2) people are incapable of sinless acts; 3) God elects those who will be saved; 4) Christ only died for those who were saved; 5) the believer has no choice whether they are saved or not; 6) those who are not predestined for salvation are damned; *and* 7) it is impossible for those who are saved, i.e. the elect, to fall away once they are converted *unless* they fail to live saintly lives (Weaver 1991, 96-99). In addition, if that does not paint darkest of all portraits of human kind and its efforts, Calvin's argument destroys what notions Luther kept from the Catholic Church's theology of 'good works.' Why perform 'good works' or, for that fact, the sacraments, if they can't assist the faithful into heaven?

The fifth factor of the PE is not a dogma like Calvin's predestination but a way of behaving that allows the believer to testifying to one's faith and, at the same time, alleviate their own salvation anxiety (Weber 2002, 74-75). In the course of developing his new theology, Calvin created a code of conduct for those who were 'saved,' i.e. those living saintly lives. This code of conduct forced, by the will of the individual and not the Catholic Church, to deny all physical desires. In other words, as Weaver put it

The Calvinist system blended well with the demands of emerging capitalism: Calvin extolled thrift, hard work, sobriety, responsibility, and self-reliance, the very virtues that were crucial for those who wished to make substantial progress in modern mercantile society (1991, 99).

According to Weber, Calvin's theology tried to free the Christian from the bonds of the Catholic Church but, in fact, it created a "spiritual isolation of each person" (Weber 2002, 62-63). In short, the social character of the PE started to resemble a cage.

The sixth factor, Pietism, was born out of the reaction by German Lutherans to suffering that was caused by the 'Thirty Year War.' According to Brenner,

The leaders of Pietism saw a lack of piety in the state church and they wanted to correct it. They saw a lack of concern for the poor, the underprivileged, the pagan and the Jew, and they wanted to help their people develop genuine concern. They wanted to duplicate the conditions and successes of the early Christian Church. But they came up with the wrong answers to accomplish their purpose. Pietism departed from Lutheran orthodoxy in a number of areas. But we can group most of them under one or the other of the following two characteristics: 1) Pietism emphasized sanctification instead of justification; and 2) Pietism fostered subjectivism (1989, 4).

Weber argues that

The defining emphasis was so thoroughly shifted to the *praxis pietatis* [practice of piety in daily life] that dogmatic orthodoxy fell into the background and occasionally seemed merely a matter of indifference (2002, 81).

In other words, Pietists shifted from theological arguments that attempted to alleviate salvation anxiety by emphasizing charitable actions, i.e. a Protestant version of ‘good works.’ According to Weber,

Pietist principles had in the end two practical effects. They led to a *still* stricter ascetic control of the organized life in one’s calling, and they anchored in religion the ethical significance of the calling even more firmly than did normal Reformed [Lutherans and Calvinists] Christians. (2002, 82, brackets added for clarification).

In essence, the social character of Pietists was defined by a heartfelt or feeling-based religious devotion to one’s vocational calling, charitable activities, and pastoral theology opposed to the guiding elements of the Catholic Church or dogmatic precision of Luther’s or Calvin’s theology.

The seventh factor of the PE comes from the theology of John Wesley (1703-91). Wesley’s theology is defined by *sola scriptura* – ‘scripture alone’ and *imitatio Christi* – “imitate Christ.” In other words, all authority comes from scripture alone and the purpose of scripture is to help the believer imitate Christ. Wesley argued that the life of Christ is marked by asceticism, directly giving aid to the poor, caring for the sick, *and*, like Luther’s, Calvin’s, and Pietists’ theologies, denying worldly reward for those rewards in heaven. According to Weber, Methodism increased the emphasis on the validity of scripture and the indispensability of testifying to belief through conduct *but* it also strengthened the anti-Calvinist doctrines that grace can be lost (Weber 2002, 91). Weber does not direct our attention to *imitatio Christi* but to Wesley’s methodological approach to religious action, the seventh factor. What is important to Weber, is that

Methodism’s “regeneration” produced in the end only a *complementary* component to the pure idea of salvation through good works: a religious anchoring of the ascetic organization of life after the idea of predestination had been abandoned (Weber 2002, 93).

However, “the emotional act of conversion was methodically induced” (Weber 2002, 92). In short, methodological religious action, over time, became methodological secular action.

This brings us to the last social character type, the Anabaptism. The Anabaptist theology is defined by its advocacy for 1) a ‘separation from the world’ because it was, in their opinion, controlled by evil, e.g. the shunning of nonbelievers and outsiders; 2) refusal to swear oaths due

of Jesus' teaching, see Matthew 5:33-37; 3) refusing to "fight evil with evil" because Jesus never did it; 4) that baptism is an external witnessing of the believer's conscious profession of faith and since infants could not understand the Gospel's message, therefore, they should not be baptized; and 5) the belief in sharing one's goods with everyone, i.e. communal property (Weaver 1991, 101-102). Weber lists the Quakers and Mennonites as Anabaptist. However, he categorizes them as "The Baptizing Sects and Churches" (Weber 2002, 93). Weber emphasized the point that Anabaptist saw their community as a "community of *sincere believers and the elect* – and only these" people and these faith based communities "should practice a strict avoidance of 'the world' (Weber 2002, 93-94). This religiously sanctioned separation, the eighth factor in Weber's PE, created and maintained a social inequality more rigid than previous Protestant theologies. In addition, Weber points out, due to the elimination of all other sacraments except baptism, the only

"inner light" of continuing revelation now enabled believers to acquire true understanding, even of the biblical revelations of God ... [and] without the inner light, human beings, and even persons guided by natural reason, remained pure creatures of desires and wants (Weber 2002, 95-96, bracket added for clarification).

In short, a reemergence of Calvin's code of conduct that advocated thrift, hard work, sobriety, responsibility, and self-reliance without Pietism version of 'good works.'

To summarize, as the theologies of Lutherans, Calvinists, Pieties, Methodists, and Anabaptists interacted with each other, over the course of history, they converged to create, what Weber calls, the 'Protestant Ethic.' For Weber, the social character of the PE is marked by 1) a calling to fulfillment ones vocational duty; 2) a believe that one's vocational calling was the highest expression that moral activity one could ever assume; 3) a belief that secular success (like money and/or power) are signs from God that the believer is doing the Will of God and that the believer has been saved; 4) that enjoyment of the fruits of secular success would cause one to lose salvation; 5) that acts of 'good works,' charity, and/or engaging in religious activities (even church attendance) were unnecessary for salvation; and last, but not least, 6) that the believer's personal understanding and interpretations of the holy scriptures were the sole authority in the believer's life. Putting it another way, using Fromm's words, these new theological ideas in their turn tend to stabilize and intensify the new social character and determined the believer's actions (1994, 296). This stabilization allowed secular forces and economic traditionalism to transform,

over a period of time, the Protestant Ethic into the Spirit of Capitalism. In short, the Spirit of Capitalism is the remnant or ghost of the Protestant Ethic. As a point of clarification, the Spirit of Capitalism did not cause modern capitalism (Weber 2002, 49). However, Weber leads the reader to believe that the Spirit of Capitalism “co-participated” in modern capitalism rise to domination.

If one had to give an alternative title to Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, it could be ‘How the Fear of Revelation 14:1-3 and Calvin’s ideology of Predestination gave birth to the Spirit of Capitalism.’ One could argue that Luther’s and Calvin’s theological extrapolations stem from their need to defend themselves from Revelation 14:1-3. According to the Bible, John of Patmos dreamt that,

... the Lamb appeared in my vision. He was standing on Mount Zion, and with him were the hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. I heard a sound from heaven which resembled the roaring of the deep, or loud peals of thunder; the sound I heard was like the melody of harpists playing on their harps. They were singing a new hymn before the throne, in the presence of the four living creatures and the elders. This hymn no one could learn except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been ransomed from the world (Revelation 14:1-3).

In other words, heaven had a limited seating capacity and they need a sign to determine that they where one of the ‘chosen’ few.

Let us turn our attention to what Weber meant when he used the term SoC. According to Kalberg, the SoC is defined by

... a configuration of values that implied the individual’s duty to increase his capital, to view work as an end in itself to be performed rationally and systematically in a calling, to earn money perpetually (without enjoying it), and to view material wealth as a manifestation of ‘competence and proficiency in a vocational calling’ (Weber 2002, xliv).

But SoC is not industrial capitalism. For Weber, the ‘spirit of capitalism’ is the secular version of the ‘protestant ethic;’ In other words, thinking historically, SoC sits between the PE and industrial capitalism. Weber’s explains the SoC using Benjamin Franklin’s maxim,

The acquisition of money, and more and more money, takes place here simultaneously with the strictest avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of it. The pursuit of riches is fully stripped of all pleasurable (eudämonistischen), and surely all hedonistic, aspects (Weber 2002, 17).

What we, in the US and most of Europe, are currently experiencing is post-industrial capitalism, the next stage past industrial capitalism. Now that the reader has a good idea of the origins of the

PE and the difference between SoC and industrial capitalism, let us turn our attention to the question, *Can Weber's 'key,' ascetic rationalism, unlock the iron cage?*

At the very end of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber paints a picture that modern human beings are born into a cage that was constructed by the 'vocational callings' of the PE. Weber states,

Tied to the technical and economic conditions at the foundation of mechanical and machine production, this cosmos today determines the style of life of all individuals born into it, *not* only those directly engaged in earning a living (Weber 2002, 123).

Originally, rephrasing one of Weber's most famous sentences, "The Puritan *wanted* to be a person with a vocational calling; today we *are forced* to be" (Weber 2002, 123) *and* borrowing Fromm's definition of social character, the social character of Protestants wanted to be a people with a vocational calling so they could attain entrance into heaven because the salvation anxiety in the social character of Catholicism (i.e. not knowing whether or not you were going to make it into heaven) was too great to bear. Putting it another way, the social character of Protestants, at the time of Weber's analysis, based based upon 1) wanting a 'sure thing,' when it came to salvation; 2) believing that they lived in an 'iron cage,' which was constructed by the economic forces of selling one's labor-power in order to live; *and* 3) the key to the 'iron cage' was accepting 'Jesus Christ as your Lord and *personal* savior,' who would let you out because you were predestined to be saved.

As time moved on, the so-called 'key' disappeared. As the social character types of the PE and the SoC gave way *to* the social character types of industrial and post-industrial capitalism, religion was kicked out of the public realm and forced into the private realm of personal matters. This relegated religion to a minor philosophical/moral orientation with no social power. Now that 'God is dead' (Nietzsche 1974, 181) and its counter part religion is on life support with the new proletariat (see Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*) all we are left with is the aphorism of industrial and post-industrial capitalism ('Their must be winners and losers,' 'Greed is good,' 'God helps those who help themselves,' 'Only the strong shall survive,' 'He who dies with the most toys wins,' 'Let the poor die and decrease the surplus population,' etc.). In short, we are now forced to find a vocation or suffer a life of poverty.

I believe that Weber knew that we could not return to religion and, for this very reason, Weber's suggests, using Kalberg's translation, that we should investigate or "chart the significance of ascetic rationalism" in order to find the key to the iron cage (2000, 124-125). In other words, Weber has no 'key.' However, he has an idea where to look for it. One gets the feeling that Weber sees the 'key' in the hands of a future charismatic leader. In short, a new bourgeois ideology.

However, as Weber has shown in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the death of a charismatic leader causes his ideals to become 'traditional thinking' for his followers. For example, Luther's, Calvin's, and Wesley's ideals became religious traditions and then social institutions. Over time, pressure from economic forces and new technology caused these social institutions of 'traditional thinking' take on a legal-rational orientation, e.g. a bureaucracy. At this point, the bureaucracy continued until its authority was challenged. This in turn created a need for a charismatic leader who could 'fix' the bureaucracy. In short, a cycle of 1) the emergence of a charismatic leader who challenges the established authority; 2) the leader's ideals become a new traditional way of thinking; 3) these new ideals become dominant; 4) then they become institutionalized, e.g. a bureaucracy, and, finally, returning to the beginning; 5) the failure of the bureaucracy to maintain order, social stability, and/or a 'sense of fairness' creates a need for a change.

Marx, on the other hand, offers a different solution – breaking the cycle of bourgeois philosophy. In other words, again quoting Fromm as he discussed social transference,

Even though man is helpless not only as a child but as an adult, this adult helplessness can be overcome. In a society which is rationally organized, which does not need to confuse man's mind in order to deceive him about the real situation, in a society that encourages rather than discourages man's independence and rationality, the sense of helplessness will have disappeared and with it the need for social transference. A society whose members are helpless need idols" (Fromm 1980, 43).

© 2009 by Walter A. Jensen. This document may be reproduced in any non-profit form without permission of the author; however, for-profit reproduction requires written permission.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications.
- Brenner, John (1989). *Pietism: Past and Present*. An Essay delivered at WELS Michigan District Southeastern Conference Pastor/Teacher/Delegate Conference on January 23, 1989 and WELS Michigan District Northern Pastoral Conference on April 3, 1989.
- Fromm, Erich (1980). *Greatness and Limitations of Freud's Thought*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- _____, (1994). *Escape from Freedom*. New York: An Owl Book – Henry Holt and Company.
- Keating, Karl (2000). *The Usual Suspects: Answering Anti-Catholic Fundamentalist*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert (1991). *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964). Boston: Beacon Press. Also available on line at www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/one-dimensional-man/index.htm
- Miller, Sam (1967). *Max Weber: Selections from his Work, with an Introduction and Commentaries*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company.
- New American Bible: Saint Joseph Edition* (1970). New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1974). *The Gay Science* (Walter Kaufmann, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Tucker, Robert C. (1978). *The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd Edition*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Wall Street. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perfs. Michael Douglas, Charlie Sheen, Martin Sheen. 1987. DVD. 20th Century FOX, 2000.*
- Weaver, Mary Jo (1991). *Introduction to Christianity: Second Edition*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, Inc.
- Weber, Max (2002). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: third edition* (Stephen Kalberg, Trans.). Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- _____, (1958). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Talcott Parsons, Trans.). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.